

## REVIEW OF *A WALK IN THE WOODS* BY BILL BRYSON

### *Summary*

In this work of creative nonfiction, Bill Bryson recounts his travels with companion Stephen Katz through sections of the Appalachian Trail, heading north from Georgia. Bryson hopes to revive a connection to the American wilderness by walking the trail, joining the subculture of hikers, and telling the wilderness history of much of the Eastern United States. Although the pair does not hike the 2,100-some miles, they deepen their friendship and differentiate themselves from the mainstream world by embracing a life off the beaten path, not just literally, but in terms of the ecological and commercial vacuum of American life, even after their journey concludes.

### *Author Philosophy*

Among his objectives for taking this trip, Bryson suggests his desires to “pee across state lines,” and to gain the ability to “gaze at a far horizon through eyes of chipped granite and say with a low, manly sniff, ‘Yeah, I’ve shit in the woods.’” However, personal growth and the nostalgic value of travel represent only small pieces of the philosophy behind this book. While Bryson touched on many underlying environmental ideas from wildlife population change to coal and oil mining and drilling, I was most interested in his take on the schism in American cultural ideology between the wilderness junkies and mainstreamers and his desire to reconcile the two schools of thought. In Bryson’s own words,

In America, alas, beauty has become something you drive to, and nature an either/or proposition—either you ruthlessly subjugate it, as at Tocks Dam and a million other places, or you deify it, treat it as something holy and remote, a thing apart, as along the Appalachian Trail. Seldom would it occur to anyone on either side that people and nature could coexist to their mutual benefit—that, say, a more graceful bridge across the Delaware River might actually set off the grandeur around it, or that the AT might be more interesting and rewarding if it wasn’t *all* wilderness, if from time to time it purposely took you past grazing cows and tilled fields. (200)

Bryson introduces the division by illustrating the effects of direct human industrial disturbances with a description of the U.S. Forest Service and its history. At first, he illuminates the fact that little more than two percent of U.S. land is considered developed, the rest, wilderness. The United States is one of few countries that has preserved its forests throughout its history. This is the shout-out for the environmentalist camp. Yet the Forest Service has designated large amounts of forestland as “multiple use,” inviting poorly-built roads (378,000 miles in national forests, with a projected 580,000 more) to facilitate resource extraction—logging, gas drilling, mining, etc. Bryson expresses his further frustration with the Forest Service concerning its economic inefficiency in surveying and logging (46-7). Bryson also reminds us that in this century (representing the boom of human development in the U.S.), forty-two mammal species have disappeared from national parks as well as several key tree species. In Bryson’s words, park officials are “watching them die” (92-3). With some cynical laughter, Bryson also describes the recent 82,000 applications for 1,500 permits allowing the privilege to hunt down the ferocious Maine moose (241). He then touches on the environmentally and socially devastating impacts of coal mining carving up the Pennsylvania countryside (179-81) and a botched job of the Army Corps of Engineers in an aborted dam plan that emptied acres of farmland and homes (198-9). Even Bryson’s examples of indirect human interference are striking. He explains the dangers of invasive species, very prevalent today’s global economy due

to the shipping system, and the more pressing danger of acid rain for wildland ecosystems (123, 138) and discusses the problems of pollution, smog, and low-level ozone (138).

Bryson is not by any means a man my father would call an “earth muffin,” who squeals at the thought of killing a tree or hunting, but the examples he brings up are centrally important to his argument because they specify the abstractions most Americans maintain that contribute to the cultural divide he illustrates. If you asked someone on the street whether cutting trees was bad for the environment, you’d probably get polarized responses, yes or no. Not many would be able to explain forest stewardship and conservation management practices. Bryson is attempting to illustrate what he calls “the America that millions of people scarcely know exists,” which he finds on his hike. These are very important contemporary environmental issues that should be understood by every citizen, but Bryson’s discussions serve more of a purpose than simple education. The issues he presents act as explanations for the extreme isolation of the trail and the integrated degradation off it. He is asking his readers to make the assessment he did along the trail. The issues are here, and it is their responsibility as readers to see the facts and build their own environmental philosophy. Few realize the divide in American environmental ideology is so great, but these examples help the reader understand.

The idea of isolation on either side of the schism is also effectively illustrated by Bryson’s portrait of the other side, the mainstream. The mid nineteenth-hundreds obsession with mechanical brilliance depicts the beginning of what Bryson sees as a cultural landslide into the current situation. He writes, “America was entering the age not just of the automobile but of the retarded attention span” (234). This is hinting, of course, at the rise of overproduction and disposability not just of material possessions, but also of businesses and entertainment venues. One of the most striking examples Bryson provides is in a momentary lapse from the trail, when he and Katz come out of the “great cosmos of woods” into a shining, garish version of contemporary society’s Mecca: the shopping center.

Here, the mountains and woods were just backdrop—familiar, known, nearby, but no more consequential or noticed than the clouds that scudded across their ridgelines. Here the real business was up close and on top of you: gas stations, Wal-Marts, Kmart, Dunkin Donuts, Blockbuster Videos, a ceaseless and unfolding pageant of commercial hideousness.

Even Katz was unnerved by it. “Jeez, it’s ugly,” he breathed in wonder, as if he had never witnessed such a thing before. I looked past him, along the line of his shoulder, to a vast shopping mall with a prairie-sized parking lot, and agreed. It was horrible. (115)

When the first pictures of the earth in space were released, people looked at them with a removed attitude. Their personal problems seemed smaller when they kept in mind the scale of global life and the planet as a whole. Bryson’s transition from the isolated world of hiking into the isolated world of commerce affords a similar separation that allows a new frame of mind to creep in. The two worlds are incredibly different. Between mainstream life and the raw, primal woodland survival associated with backpacking is an incredible void. There is woods, and there is interstate highway. The pace of living, prioritization of preferences and needs, and generally the emotional impact of the two lifestyles are completely different, and Bryson longs for a happy medium. The reader feels the shift, too, and fully engages in Bryson’s argument. They become skeptical of those who hike in and request emergency medical helicopter rescue so as not to miss business meetings, flaunt tricked-out watches that read solar radiation levels and check email, but can’t tell time for an accurate assessment of how much daylight is left (214), or never try escaping the fast pace of mainstream American culture at all. The schism is clear.

### ***Impacts on My Thinking***

Bryson's biggest idea of closing the gap between environmentalism and commercialism is one I gave a hearty hoo-rah when I saw it forming in his book. I have had similar experiences of shock when emerging from an extended hike into the hub of society, and that example hit me particularly close to home. While I am somewhat separated from some of Bryson's other arguments, and my biases don't exactly allow me to grab a pitchfork and torch and head for Forest Service headquarters, I agree that there is an existing division in contemporary America, and that it should be healed. Isn't this the argument of every enterprise that encourages sustainability? Sustainable efforts are in my opinion some of the best ideas for advancement out there because they satisfy both commercial needs and environmental needs and blend them with each other in one initiative.

Additionally, I valued his words on trail life. What I found so compelling about this book was the ease with which Bryson portrayed the human emotional connection to the environment, particularly hiking trails. The narration of his book was so *readable*, speckled with humor and completely arresting. The history he gave was so tightly weaved in with his own adventure that I didn't realize just how much information I was picking up as I read. This is a particularly important skill of a travel writer. His attitudes, the ups, downs, ecstasies, and annoyances were all doubled in my experience reading. I think that writing, especially creatively, is very important to conveying the human connection to the environment. Environmental science is a human science, and we can learn a lot as communicators from reading authors like Bryson.

### ***Evidence of Book's Influence and Recommendation***

I seem to have a special place in my heart for misunderstood subcultures. I got a lot of annoyed and disbelieving questions about long distance running (--How far is it? --26.2. --*Miles?* --Yeah. --Did you win? --No, there were 30,000 people there. --Oh. That sucks.), climbing (--So, have you ever, like, fallen down?), and especially hiking (--So, you, like, don't shower or anything?), so I definitely sympathized with the social division between hikers and non-hikers that Bryson suggests.

This is in no way a profound experience, but the more I considered it, the more it seemed to illustrate exactly what Bryson is getting at in *Walk*. I carry a knife with me whenever I wear clothing with pockets—just a habit from time spent outdoors, climbing, and working. It is quite useful on campus for opening bags of locked M&Ms, sharpening pencils, opening mail and other such things. A few weeks ago, an acquaintance from class noticed it in my pocket and with an absolutely delighted facial expression exclaimed, "Oh my God! That's great! Your phone is so *small!*" I mumbled some kind of agreement and tucked it further into my pocket. I didn't want her to think I was about to mug her.

It was a simple mistake, but how many people are completely unaware of a whole class of armed and dangerous people roaming the sidewalks here at Allegheny College? We form so many different understandings of things based on our individual cultural experiences. To some, a knife is a tool, to others, a weapon, to others still, a fancy nail file. Is it any different with the natural world? I believe nature to be something fully integrated with every aspect of my life, some might think it sacred and removed, not to be touched except by worthy hands, and others might think of it like a pantry of resources. None of us is wrong. A knife can certainly be all three of the things we associate it with just as nature can be seen through any of its respective lenses. What is important is that we realize that one individual does not own the world's knife

supply just as one school of thought does not control the natural world. We must integrate all views of what we have to work with and gain some kind of common ground.

Bryson's environmental philosophy is not as specific, formal, or advanced as a Master's thesis might be, but his illustration of the cultural divide he presents is important because of the audience he is reaching. Bryson is first and foremost a travel writer. This book is for all his readers, anyone who can pick up the book after being intrigued by the inquisitive bear on its cover. Bryson's writing style is so accessible that any reader can see the same historical knowledge and ideological vision in this book. Although Bryson is not a professional environmentalist, he can still bring his environmental causes and fiery personal opinions to the forefronts of his readers' minds. The job of a nonfiction writer is to bring your experiences to your readers, to encourage vicarious life so that what you realized in some situation in which the reader will probably never find himself will become as clear to him as if he were there with you. Bryson gives his readers a tremendous gift, therefore.

I learned to pitch a tent and sleep beneath the stars. For a brief, proud period I was slender and fit. I gained a profound respect for the wilderness and nature and the benign dark power of woods. I understand now, in a way I never did before, the colossal scale of the world. I found patience and fortitude that I didn't know I had. I discovered an America that millions of people scarcely know exists.... (274)

This is all translated into the reader's experience and becomes part of his understanding. The reader reaches an understanding about cultural choice and environmental issues fairly and easily, and is compelled to form an opinion. The progress of Bryson's writing forces an official standpoint forth on the part of the reader by the time the novel is complete. The conclusion is really a union of reader and writer, discussing and grunting at the wilderness. This is a must-read for anyone. We must all, at least vicariously, shit in the woods.